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## BULLETIN OF THE ART INSTITUTE OF CHICAGO

### TREATMENT OF PLASTER CASTS

THE Art Institute has practiced of late years the simplest treatment for keeping the plaster sculpture presentable.

The cast is first sized with an application of linseed oil and turpentine. This is put on with a brush, and it is immaterial whether it is done when the cast is new and clean, or after it becomes dirty, provided only that it has not been painted or in any way coated with foreign matter. The only object is to make it impervious to water, so that subsequent applications will not sink in.

Then the cast is washed over with a coat of whiting and water with a little glue (practically a fine whitewash), applied quite thin with a brush, and stippled or pounced on, so as not to show brush marks. A little yellow ochre is put into the wash, so that it will not be a blue or dead white. This wash is perfectly soluble, and when it gets dirty it is easily removed and a fresh coat applied. It is obvious that the cast is no more coated or loaded after the twentieth application than after the first.

Years ago the German government offered a prize for a method of preserving plaster casts. The Duchend process was evolved, in which the cast was sprayed with a liquid chemical, which hardened the surface, and made it impervious to water, so that it could be washed. The Art Institute purchased the spraying machine and the process at considerable expense, and it fulfilled its promises. But under repeated washings the casts grew grimy, like a white door or any other painted object. The Carnegie Institute at Pittsburgh has a process of hardening the casts, which appears successful for the present, but what the result will be in twenty years it is impossible to predict.

Objection is sometimes made to our thin coat of whiting, and of course it would be preferable to let the cast entirely alone. But something must be done, since the casts in the smoke of Chicago become intolerably soiled in a few years. This is the least objectionable method of

which we know. It is surprising in fact how little the modelling is obscured, even when it is delicate and detailed. It is doubtful if anybody, however skillful, can tell at a distance of eight or ten feet whether a cast has been whitened or not, and eight or ten feet is not a great distance at which to view a life-size statue. The larger forms are not in the least affected by the process of whitening.

An incident illustrative of this occurred in our galleries not long ago. An eminent sculptor, and a marble cutter, perhaps the best known in America, both from the East, were looking at the cast of Joan of Arc by Chapu. The sculptor remarked "That is marble." The other, looking at it more narrowly for a moment, said, "No, it is plaster, cast from marble." As they went down the Renaissance Gallery, where the statues of Michael Angelo are, the sculptor said, "They do look like marble, don't they?" If skilled persons like these cannot tell the plaster from marble at close range, the sculpture must be in good condition.

It is true that the marble originals of the Venus of Melos or the Elgin marbles have a beauty and character that cannot be reproduced in the plaster cast. But the question with us is not between originals and casts, but between one kind of surface coloration of casts and another. In any case the translucency of marble cannot be imitated. But the translucency is apparent only in certain lights, so that often it is difficult to distinguish between marble and plaster at a little distance.

The truth is that criticism of the treatment of plaster casts comes not from sculptors, but rather from painters. It is pointed out that there is great beauty in the discolorations and accidental contrasts of color in old marble. This is undeniable, but it is the beauty of painting and not of sculpture. What the sculptor is interested in is pure form, and form is obscured by discolorations. A statue browned and yellowed with shellac looks better in a studio or a parlor than a white one, but it is of far less value for the study of sculpture.